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ABSTRACT

This report synthesizes the experience-based ideas that emerged from small group interaction at the 16th annual Montana Rural Education Conference, which focused on the pros and cons of school district consolidation. Conferees first heard from panelists and speakers expressing a spectrum of positive and negative positions on the consolidation issue, and then divided into seven small, heterogeneous groups. Four attitudes were expressed by numerous individuals and through consensus across at least three of the seven groups. These were: (1) voluntary consolidation was not viewed with great opposition, but forced consolidation was abhorred; (2) there was strong identification with local control of local schools; (3) regional consolidation of educational services offers potential for better use of limited financial resources and improved operational efficiency; and (4) education is more than a function of cost. The report expands upon each of these topics and also delineates other suggestions that were put forth by only one or two groups or several individuals. The majority of conferees seemed receptive to positive merits of restructuring Montana's schools as long as the element of local control remains vital and changes are made incrementally and are well monitored throughout implementation. The small group interaction activity sheet used at the conference is appended. (RAH)

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Follow-up Report to the Montana Rural Education Center

SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING OPTIONS/ALTERNATIVES:

Synthesis on Attitudes Expressed by Participants of The Montana Rural Education Conference Western Montana College Dillon, Montana

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SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING OPTIONS/ALTERNATIVES

The theme of the 16th annual Montana Rural Education Conference was *Looking the Dragon in the Eye: School Consolidation Pros and Cons*. Conferees heard from several panelists and speakers who, collectively, expressed a spectrum of positive and negative positions on the consolidation issue. Following the panel presentations and individual speakers , participants engaged in an activity to explore options and alternatives to consolidation. A total of 49 conferees divided into seven groups of seven. Small group membership was heterogeneously representative of the diversity of those attending the conference (i.e., county school superintendents, teachers, local district administrators, and school board members). The activity consisted of two parts--individual brainstorming and group share/consensus. Each person received a worksheet with instructions for each part. The activity worksheet is attached in Appendix A. This report synthesizes the ideas that emerged from consensus reached in small groups. Statements of the various ideas on school restructuring are composites of views expressed by groups and individuals. Suggested ideas offered may not necessarily be research-based but they do represent an experience-rich tapestry of the feelings and attitudes of the rural Montana educational practitioners and policymakers who participated in this conference.

ATTITUDES HELD IN COMMON

The concepts of how schools should be restructured spanned extremes--from leaving districts structured as they now exist to consolidating into one statewide district. Interestingly, though, both of these ideas were accompanied by statements adamant about maintaining local control through local school boards. The proposal calling for a single statewide school district advocated that boards of local schools should have authority to develop policies and determine instructional methodology. This sentiment for local control was one of four inter-related general attitudes that prevailed through this interactive activity: 1) Consolidation, when it is voluntary, is not viewed with great opposition, but forced consolidation is abhorred; 2) There is strong identification with local control of local schools; 3) Regional consolidation of educational services offers potential for better use of limited financial resources and improved operational efficiency; and 4) Education is more than a function of cost.

Forced consolidation vs. voluntary consolidation

Conferees expressly stated that decisions on the issue of school district consolidation should be made at the local level by the communities and districts to be impacted. Relative to who the local decision-makers should be, there were two sets of opinions--one position favored the trustees as the decision-makers while the second position held that taxpaying constituents of the districts to be impacted should vote on the issue. Conferees rigidly opposed state-sponsored

mandates that would force districts to consolidate. This position applies to consolidation resulting from direct legislative action, specifically aimed at reducing the number of school districts. It equally applies to defacto measures, i.e., district inability to meet standards required for school accreditation--particularly when the inability is attributed to financial constraints resulting from local economic set backs or reduction in state funding. Conferees believe that forced consolidation offers few benefits that improve educational experiences of children and, at best, might provide only limited cost savings for the state and local districts. Direct or defacto dictates disallow consideration of geographic and demographic diversity within the state. Rivers and mountain ranges present natural barriers that impinge upon transporting students to consolidated school sites. The majority of students attending isolated schools in sparsely populated regions of the state are already being bussed. Bussing students to schools farther away from their homes would not only add time to their commutes, but could also increase transportation costs for consolidated districts.

Less isolated districts located in common geographic regions--not requiring more than thirty minutes of one-way commuting time for students-- voluntarily consolidating will likely be more appealing to local constituents. Consolidation of non-isolated districts opens possibilities for establishing discipline-specific magnet schools, especially for high school students. Cost savings, realized by the state through such consolidations, could be applied to continued operation of isolated schools where consolidation is less feasible.

Local control of local schools

The attitude of local control emerged more frequently than any other suggestion offered through this activity. Maintaining local control of local schools is a concept infused with deep emotion. Grounded in the belief that members of the community are best able and most qualified to determine the most effective system for delivery of education--support for local control is almost universal. Communities place high value on the local control of their schools--they believe educational services are more responsive to educational needs of students when local decision-making is intact. A local district has greater control of its destiny, and children feel more involved in the (educational) institution when the school is in "their community". Even those groups and individuals expressing support for district consolidation were firm about keeping local schools open. Closing local schools should not be the object of consolidation. The rationale for this position is that local schools preserve a sense of community.

There were statements attesting to outstanding leadership afforded in local districts, especially so for districts that operate without principals or superintendents. Locally controlled schools place greater emphasis on accountability for the "products" of their institutions--the students. In other words, the priority is on students rather than on "the system".

Regional consolidation of educational services

Acknowledging the perception that Montanans are generally unwilling to accept increased taxes to support public education, sharing educational services across district boundaries offers a potential solution to the lack of adequate funding. Several proposals for a regional educational structure were made. Through regionalizing the delivery of some educational services, there likely could be cost savings, more equitable access by students to services, and improved regional communication among teachers and administrators.

A "full service cooperative agency" was the label most frequently used to reference a regional structure. Primary ideals of this structure are that it would save money for districts, maintain local control of local schools, and coordinate curriculum across the region. Proposals called for regional directors who would be elected by the districts being served by the agency. The regional structure would replace functions of county superintendents of schools and some roles now carried out by Montana's Office of Public Instruction (OPI). The regional agency could provide support systems for local districts in areas such as staff development, staff recruitment, coordination of distance learning opportunities, curriculum development and coordination, bulk purchasing arrangements, coordination of special educational programs (i.e., gifted and talented, handicapped education, and Chapter 1), a central location for resources (i.e., special audio-visual equipment and library media and materials), and centralized record keeping for OPI.

Education is more than a function of cost

Recognizing that limitations on financial resources for educational expenditures is a primary reason to explore consolidation and other restructuring alternatives, one group, with tongue-in-cheek, proposed doing away with all school districts and transferring delivery of educational services to home schools. This group explained that such a move would indeed greatly reduce educational expenditures by the state and local districts. However, as clarified by this group, such a move was neither constitutional, nor would it ensure equitable or quality education for the state's children. The group suggested that their absurd proposal forces the issue--what is of greatest importance: education or money?

Public schools exist to meet the educational needs of children and their communities. Educational services should be effectively delivered to meet their needs. Any changes that restructure educational institutions should keep the needs of children as the highest priority. Public attention should focus on the importance of quality education rather than the least expensive educational operation. Effective education and cost-effective educational services do not always share a common meaning. Quality educational opportunities should be equitably available to all children, and the costs should be equitably shared by all. For example, students living in property-poor school districts should have access to the same educational opportunities

as students living in property-rich districts. Otherwise, the results of inadequate, unequal education will impose a more costly burden on all. Montana's past educational system has produced quality "products", and today's students deserve more than being reduced to the lowest common denominator in an economic experiment.

Other Remedies

The previous four attitudes were identified by numerous individuals and through consensus across at least three of the seven groups. The following ideas/suggestions were addressed by one or two groups and several individuals. Not all of these proposals or comments gained group consensus. Some concepts propose district or service consolidation while others could be implemented within existing structures to enhance operational efficiency. Several ideas would create significant fiscal impact.

- Boarding facilities for students who live too far from the consolidated site for reasonable transportation should be provided.
- Should districts consolidate, equalizing teachers' salaries among the districts will reduce potential cost savings.
- Should reasonable transportation access to educational services be restricted by consolidation, districts should remain separate.
- Business interests and the community will find partnerships with locally controlled schools more inviting.
- School board size should be determined by number of students in the district and/or size of the community.
- Site-based councils should be established for each local school whether they are part of a consolidated district or not.
- Keeping K-6 schools in the community should be highest priority if and when districts consolidate.
- One statewide salary schedule with health benefits should be established for teachers.
- Schools could be consolidated into 56 countywide school districts with one school clerk for each county and a separate county commission for education.
- Transportation services could be established countywide and become a function of the county rather than individual districts.

- Services of district superintendents could be shared by two or more districts, but each school should have a principal.
- Mandates imposed by the state legislature and/or federal government should be accompanied with adequate funding to carry out the dictates.
- Distance learning opportunities should be provided by making fiber optics available to all schools.
- Small schools should pool resources for maintenance and custodial services, athletics, and transportation.
- School board members need more opportunities to become informed on issues impacting their schools.
- A four percent sales tax should be passed to finance schools.
- The legislature and OPI should be more cooperative with each other and act jointly to reduce paper work required of schools and districts.
- Schools should be kept small enough so that students can receive individual assistance.
- The school year should be extended to at least 200 student days with ten additional days for staff development.
- The State Superintendent of Public Instruction should be appointed by the governor.

CONCLUSION

Considering the diversity of opinions expressed by the conferees, seeing them work toward a common set of acceptable ideas for restructuring Montana's schools was refreshing. School consolidation discussions tend to be highly polarized, yet the group consensus process minimized the adversarial tone of this meeting.

The majority of conferees seemed receptive to positive merits of restructuring Montana's schools as long as the element of local control remains vital. However, they cautioned that any changes be made incrementally. The public will be more accepting of gradual changes if they are involved and kept informed of benefits and restrictions brought by the changes. All changes should be carefully monitored throughout implementation and have evaluation plans in place prior to implementation. Workshop participants encouraged that restructuring efforts be accompanied

by an aggressive plan for a public relations campaign promoting the positive aspects and accomplishments of public schools. Adequate funding to implement such plans is essential.

Effective public relations efforts are critical in countering the taxpayer revolt and renewing citizen interest and involvement in their schools. Reversing the public's antagonistic feelings toward taxes for schools will not occur without community involvement and sense of ownership in public education. Even without significant school restructuring, local support must be fostered as school facilities in many communities have dire need for upgrading or complete replacement.

In all the discussion among the educational practitioners and policy makers at this conference, there were numerous remarks about adequate funding and the need to tap new financial resources. Surprisingly, though, there were no references or suggestions that financial or other incentives be made available to school districts that voluntarily consolidate. Perhaps this can be attributed to the strong attachment and identification with local control. One conferee summarized the importance of local control by stating, "Local decisions should be made for local kids, by local people."

APPENDIX A

SMALL GROUP INTERACTION ACTIVITY

Part 1--Individual Brainstorm:

For this activity, review your conference notes and recall the discussion you have heard. Using what you have learned at this conference and your own experiences, think of what would be the ideal structure for Montana's schools. Jot down some of your ideas using the following questions to help guide your thinking: How would you change the school district structure? Why are these changes needed? What would these changes look like? What are the benefits of these changes (for kids, communities, schools, and state)?

Part 2--Group Share/Consensus:

Before you begin, select three people from your group--someone to facilitate group discussion, someone to record the group's responses on the chart pack sheet, and someone to report the results of this activity. Next, have each person share their ideas on the ideal structure for Montana's schools.

After each person has shared ideas, as a group complete the following:

1. Reach consensus on 1 - 3 most acceptable ideas.
2. Explain how these ideas would benefit kids, community, schools, and the state.
3. Record your ideas on the chart pack sheet.